

The Waffle Home

It goes without saying, the South has given life to some of the most famous - or infamous - restaurants in the United States. Many of them are still exclusive to south of the Mason-Dixon line, including Chicken Express, Whataburger, and Torchy's Taco, and each one has their own charm. Chicken Express and their Christian values are only barely rivaled by Chick-fil-a; Whataburger brags of 24/7 service, spicy ketchup, and unique but recognizable look. But nothing rivals the magic, the charm, and the outright character of Waffle House.

It's 1:55 A.M. and I'm out with some friends on a Saturday night in a mid-sized southern town. I'm sitting outside of an old dive bar after having a few more drinks than I anticipated. It's last call and the bouncer just flipped on the lights. A fog is slowly falling on the night, and the eco-friendly LED street lamps are dimming to save energy, or reduce light pollution, or both; I'm not sure. But it's time for food, and my taxi is on the way. As we wait, we TRY to discuss what the group wants to eat to no avail. After 10 minutes and twice accidentally getting into the wrong cab, my taxi arrives. No decision has been made. "Drive down that road with all the stuff," blurts my well-inebriated friend. The driver already knows which one. It's not a huge town.

We've passed McDonalds, which closed 2 hours ago. Wendy's closed 3 hours ago. Whataburger, of course, is open but only the Drive-Thru. Taco Bell just closed. Chick-fil-a - closed. KFC, Popeye's - both closed hours ago. IHOP is open, but I just spent \$55.75 at the bar, and I'm on a budget. Through the fog, I see it. Cutting through the haze like a warm butter knife

through soggy syrup-covered waffles; 11 immense, yellow, luminescent squares in two rows of six then five. In each square, a letter. W-A-F-F-L-E topped the grid like a star on a Christmas tree. H-O-U-S-E followed directly below. And like a Christmas tree it was. Below the sign was a welcoming present wrapped in faded yellow and red. “There!”

The charm of Waffle House begins before I even walk into the paradise. They say that if your Waffle House artisan cook isn’t outside smoking, just leave. I depart the cab and I pay the driver the last bit of cash I had on hand. “Keep it.” I say as I close the door on the worn out Crown Victoria. The driver drives off, and I approach heaven. The cook, as if it’s protocol, is outside smoking a Marijuana filled ‘rillo. He stamps it out, tucks the blunt behind his ear, stands up and opens the door for me and my friends. At this point, I know it’s going to be good.

I enter the building using the double layer of single doors that is standard for all Waffle Houses. On the left, the diner-like setup features six tables and bar-style seating in front of the open kitchen. Included in the package, an old-school jukebox playing family-friendly country or pop. To the right, are the less-than-friendly bathrooms. The right side of the kitchen features the classic two-way mirror for the manager to survey their kitchen and workers. The marvelous mixed smell of waffles, eggs, bacon, sausage, hash browns, chocolate chips, blueberries, and the House “clean” aroma hits me all at once. The floors have a slight slip to them. A hefty security guard sits in the corner reading a newspaper and/or magazine. The cook that was so polite just seconds to me seconds earlier moves around to the kitchen, puts on an apron and some gloves and leans against the counter. He says something to one of the young waitresses, who rolls her eyes, laughs, and finishes cleaning dishes.

We sit at one of the six tables. A thin layer of grease covers the already-placed menu. Another waitress, an elderly white woman, walks up to my fuddled group and places unwrapped silverware, piece by piece, in front of me. Napkin, then fork, then knife. Napkin, fork, knife, until we all have an arrangement before us. “How are ya’ll doing tonight?” she greets my group in a king deep-southern accent. “What can I get ya’ll to drink?” Each order was responded with some variation of “Sure, hun!” “Okay, sweetheart” or “Okay, what about you, darlin’?” The charm was overwhelming, tipping towards a Waffle Home rather than Waffle House. My buzzed troupe peruses the greasy menu. Naturally, everyone immediately focuses on the All-Star Breakfast; \$8.99 for a waffle, a choice of meat, double eggs, and hashbrowns with your choice of starch (which will always be toast.) The bold and adventurous go for the steak or a hamburger; nobody is ever that bold or adventurous.

The waitress, likely named Georgia or Barbara, returns with the drinks a mere minute later; as if they’re pre-filled. Like magic. “Have ya’ll decided what you’re gonna eat?” “All-Star Breakfast with scrambled eggs with cheese, city ham, and hash browns scattered, smothered, and covered, please ma’am!” I say as if by habit. My group of goons all order All-Star Breakfasts with any variation of meats, eggs, and ‘browns. “Comin’ right up, hun!” says the waitress. She walks to the open kitchen with her hand-written orders ready to go.

She stands on the “mark;” a square of red and grey tile in the kitchen. And another wave of magic, charm, and character begins. The cook turns to the grill at the ready. The waitress, on her mark, calls “Pull 2 ham, 1 bacon, 1 sausage.” That special, secret Waffle House code. Simple

and secret, but obvious. The cook gets to work; throwing meats on grills. As he finished planting the last sausage order, the waitress chimes again. “Drop 4 hash brown, make 2 in a ring.” The cook once again gets to work, whipping out scoops of hash browns to the grill. The waitress walks away from the mark, and the cook takes out the plates. All eight of them. The cook uses some sort of combination of jelly and butter packets in order to memorize what food goes to what plate. Like magic.

It doesn't take long for the food to finished. Just nine minutes later, Georgia (or Barbara?) is carrying four plates to our table, expertly placing in front of each of us a plate. As we dug into our breakfast feasts, Barbara calls, “The waffles are on their way!” or something along those lines. I was only paying attention to the plate ahead of me. I covered my hashbrowns and eggs in Tabasco. I slung the butter and jelly on my toast. Salt, pepper, and a little bit more Tabasco. I was already done with my eggs before the waffles arrived.

Georgia arrives with three more plates and a glass bottle of syrup. The team and I move our plates aside for the landing on our already full table. The waffles, already topped with a slice of fine butter, arrive as extravagantly as the other plates. “The last waffle is almost done, hun!” she says to the friend to my left. The rest of us pause to set our waffle up for success. Spread the butter, and coat the rest of the waffle in warm syrup. Then, as we've done it a hundred times before, we simultaneously get back to eating. Moments later, the cook walks up to us with a plate in his hand. ““Ay bro, so I kinda messed this one up a little. That good?” “All good, man,” my friend says, mouth full of a combination of hashbrown and sausage. He takes the plate, spreads the butter, and coats the waffle in syrup. And just like that, he's back to finishing his eggs.

We all finish our main entrees in concert. The waffles have marinated in the sweet syrup and now fully melted butter. All hell has now broken loose as we stack our plates on top of each other at the end of the table. We position the waffles in front of us and let slip the dogs of war. Forks and knives are *clinking* and *clanking* at rapid succession. The sound of metal on ceramic coming from our table equals that of a roadhouse after 5 P.M. The waffles didn't stand a chance. Barbara came to check on us, likely because of all the noise. "We'll just get our checks," I said, mouth full of buttermilk goodness. "Separate, hun?" I nodded. That's all I could do since I just shoved another pile of waffle into my mouth.

The checks arrived. As with the rest of the Waffle Home, they had charm. Hand-written, hand-mathed, and covered in splotches of grease and syrup. We got up, paid Georgia at the register, walked towards the exit. The cook opened the door for us on our way out, as he was on his way back inside. It was 2:20 A.M. Fog and dew has settled on the cars outside. Street lamps looked slightly brighter.